

20 COMMENTARY ON MACAULAY'S HISTORY

History has its foreground and its background^ and it is principally in the management of its perspective, that one artist differs from another. Some events must be represented on a large scale, others diminished ; the great majority will be lost in the dimness of the horizon ; and a general idea of their joint effect will be given by a few slight touches.

In this respect, no writer has ever equalled Thucydides. He was a perfect master of the art of gradual diminution. His history is sometimes as concise as a chronological chart; yet it is always perspicuous. . . . He never fails to contract and to expand it in the right place.¹

Macaulay concludes by asserting that ' in the art of historical narration ³ Thucydides surpassed all his rivals. ' But narration, though an important part of the business of a historian, is not the whole. . . . The writer who does not explain the phenomena as well as state them, performs only one half of his office/ Thucydides failed as an interpreter of the facts ; though he discussed practical questions very ably, and was undoubtedly a sagacious and reflecting man, some of his general observations were very superficial.²

On rereading Thucydides in later years Macaulay reiterated his conviction that Thucydides was the greatest of narrative historians. In 1836 he speaks of the intense interest which Thucydides inspired, and says that the Peloponnesian War made the Annals of Tacitus

seem ' cold
and poor' when he read them side by side. '
Indeed, what
colouring is there which would not look tame
when placed
side by side with the magnificent light, and
the terrible
shade, of Thucydides? Tacitus was a great
man ; but
he was not up to the Sicilian expedition/ ³
In 1848, he had come to think that even
in the art of

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid. pp. 339-41.

³ Letter to Ellis, July 25, 1836. Trevelyan, i. 449.